

Vocations

Today is designated vocations Sunday. When anyone feels called to the priesthood or consecrated life, it is referred to as a vocation. By the religious life we mean those men or women who give up family life to live in a religious community of either sisters, brothers or priests. Those who join religious orders like, say the Sisters of Charity, take vows such as poverty, chastity and obedience. Priests, who join a diocese, such as in my case, are called secular clergy. We don't take vows as such but on our ordination day we make a promise of celibacy and obedience to the bishop.

Today, in the Western world, there is a shortage of vocations. But in other parts of our world such as Africa, Asia and Poland vocations are numerous. Last year the Vatican announced that vocations worldwide were steadily increasing especially in countries where the church is rapidly expanding. The catholic population of the world also went up by 12%. It is mainly in the Western World where the situation is worrying. There are a number of factors which have contributed to this decline.

Today, the idea of a life long commitment to any way of life, let alone priesthood or consecrated life, is 'out of kilter' with our post modern way of thinking. For many it seems quite unrealistic. Things change so quickly these days that situations are not as stable or predictable as they once were.

Vocations also tend to dry up in more affluent societies. So many superficial attractions for youth in our modern world only serve to distract the attention away from the spiritual. It's so easy for young people to grow up in a secular environment where God or religion is rarely mentioned. Church vocations don't come out of a vacuum. We can only hear the 'call' of God if the spiritual dimension of our lives has been nurtured. So the crisis of vocations in the West is basically a crisis of faith.

Contrary to what a large number of people think, the law of celibacy has very little to do with the vocations shortage. If catholic priests were allowed to marry, their ministry, I believe, would come across more as a job than a vocation and they would be far less effective. Like the Good Shepherd, the good priest 'lays down His life for His sheep'. Married people lay down their lives for each other and their family but in this way they are laying down their lives for Christ. St Paul has told us that you cannot combine spiritual fatherhood of the family of God with fatherhood of a natural family. The two don't mix. And, of course, if there were married priests there would be no shortage of divorced priests as well. Did you know that thousands of vicars are married to divorcees? It's no harm to bear this in mind when arguing for a married priesthood. If I were divorced, whether I'm the innocent party or not, how could I possibly stress to engaged couples the fundamental importance of the permanence of marriage which is Church teaching. I would have to skim over that bit.

Another factor why vocations have taken a nose dive is that large families seem a thing of the past. A lot of parents would frown on the idea if one of their offspring opted for a religious vocation. So contraception has a lot to do with vocation shortage as well.

Finally, I believe we, priests, are not entirely blameless for the present shortage among our ranks. We have been given a special anointing of the Holy Spirit on the day of our ordination to impart, with conviction, the gospel of truth and lead people to God. But we have sometimes come across as being rather apologetic about our ministry and thereby done ourselves no favours. Wishy-washy leadership does not appeal to young people or indeed anybody today. And people are not likely to take up a vocation if they feel we have compromised the gospel for the sake of political correctness or some other reason.

When it comes to vocations we all need to examine our consciences so that nothing in our way of live will prevent young people from hearing the voice of God calling them to ordained ministry or the religious life. May the Lord send an abundance of new labourers into his vineyard?

QUESTIONS

1. *Do you think that life-long commitment to any vocation at the present day (Priesthood, marriage, consecrated Life) is too much to ask for or is it unreasonable? Discuss*

2. *Spiritual writers say that today we have repressed our sense of God and the transcendent – the domain of spirituality is banished from everyday life or marginalised. Could this be the main reason for the dearth in vocations? Discuss*

3. *How do you feel about a married priesthood, bearing in mind that some of them, of course, would be divorced as happens in other denominations or would it not bother you? Discuss*

- 4 *Does the group think that smaller families contribute to vocation shrinkage especially in the Western world? Discuss*